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2009

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Recommended Citation
Hatch, Rachel, "Watching the World Wake Up From History: 20 Years After the Fall of the Berlin Wall" (2009). *News and Events*. Paper 379.
http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/379

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Illinois Wesleyan University

Web story

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September 22, 2009 **Contact:** Rachel Hatch, (309) 556-3960

Watching the World Wake Up From History: 20 Years After the Fall of the Berlin Wall

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – This year marks the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, one of the most famous symbols of the Cold War.

"The city of Berlin [which was separated by the wall] has been holding celebrations all year, leading up to the anniversary on November 9," said Sonja Fritzsche, associate professor of German and Eastern European Studies at Illinois Wesleyan, who was in Berlin working on research at the Humboldt University in Berlin this summer.

Illinois Wesleyan University will honor the anniversary with an international film series on the wall and talk by Visiting Professor Bill Brown from Oct. 4-8, following German Reunification Day (which is Oct. 3). Details are available on the German Studies site. (www.iwu.edu/german/Events.html).

The Berlin Wall amounted to more than 80 miles of concrete and wire built in 1961 under the Soviet leadership of Nikita Khrushchev. Constructed to stem the tide of emigration from the east, the city of West Berlin was encircled by the wall. In 1990, the former Federal Republic of Germany (or West Germany) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR or East Germany) reunified on October 3, nearly a year after the fall of the wall.

Now that 20 years have passed since 1989, it might seem as though the events of that November could be relegated to the pages of history. Like all history, however, the ramifications of an event reverberate through time.

"The Cold War still shapes the time we live in," said Fritzsche, who pointed to Afghanistan, a country where Soviets and American-funded troops fought before the Taliban took control. "There's a legacy of the Cold War."

Marina Balina, the Isaac Funk Professor of Russian Studies at Illinois Wesleyan, agrees. "For studying Iran, Iraq, the whole Middle East, Central America and even Cuba, the Cold War will always be the point of reference," said Balina, who was raised in Soviet Russia and studied at the Paedagogische Hochschule Potsdam in the former East Germany. "When we talk about

Russia, we ask, ‘Are we going back to the Cold War stance?’ Students today were not raised with the Cold War. They often ask, ‘Going back to what?’ They don’t even know where to begin.”

Fritzsche and Balina have seen how the unified Germany has evolved over the last two decades. Both have traveled to Germany many times since the wall came down, and both say the change has been incredible.

A huge, gray slab

“I have seen the wall from both sides,” said Balina, who first came upon the wall when she visited East Berlin at the age of 19, while studying in Potsdam, GDR. “I got lost in East Berlin,” she remembered. “I suddenly came upon this huge, gray slab. It was this incredibly depressing gray color. There was nothing for miles, just gray, marked only by barbed wire and ditches in this awful no man’s land.” According to Balina, the vacant houses near the wall basked the area in an eerie silence. “Too many people were trying to escape by jumping from the third and fourth floors of the houses, or digging ditches underneath them, so they were emptied,” said Balina. “I remember seeing this and thinking, ‘My God, someone is more oppressed than we are in Russia.’”

Balina, her husband and son left the Soviet Union in 1988, and she came to work for Illinois Wesleyan in 1989. Just before she started, she attended a conference in West Berlin. The group of international scholars was invited to visit East Berlin for the day. “I had friends in East Germany who knew I left. I wanted them to know I was all right, so I put my name in to go,” said Balina. She arrived at the infamous “Checkpoint Charlie” [Designated Checkpoint C by the American military, it was one of the few places people could cross between East and West Germany], but could go no further. “I looked past the checkpoint, and there were Soviet soldiers on the east side of the border. It was too much. Too many memories of oppression and fear.” Fighting back tears, she fled to a crowded shopping area in West Berlin. “There I ‘celebrated’ my American freedom,” she said.

‘Right now’

Fritzsche was studying abroad for a year as an undergraduate, and was in Berlin on German Reunification Day in 1990. “Nobody knew on the west side that the wall would be coming down,” said Fritzsche, who noted the opening came almost as a mistake when a local GDR official announced visas were being issued for East Germans to pass into West Berlin. “When asked by reporters when it was open, he became overwhelmed and announced, ‘Right now.’ Curious people began to come to the wall and see if they could get across. They could,”

she said. Word circulated, and so many people came down to the wall from both sides of Berlin, that the guards no longer asked for passes, and just let people through, said Fritzsche.

The atmosphere in all of Germany for the next year was elated, said Fritzsche. "You see all these pictures of people celebrating at the wall, and westerners came and easterners came. There was this great euphoria that lasted through a year," she said. Throughout those days, people dismantled the wall, a piece at a time. "I was walking past one day, and a man with a hammer whacked off a piece of the wall and said, 'Here,'" said Fritzsche with a laugh.

The euphoria lasted well into 1990 and through Reunification Day on Oct. 3. "Then I think reality began to set in," said Frtizsche, "and people began to ask, 'How are we going to do this?'"

Unification pains

The transition from two countries to one was not an easy one, said Balina and Fritzsche. Over the last 20 years, Germany has been plagued with tensions between former easterners and westerners. In many ways, Fritzsche says the lines of east and west continued without the need for a wall, a phenomenon nicknamed the *die Mauer im Kopf*, or "wall in the head."

"Even though the physical wall had fallen, this psychological wall continued," said Fritzsche, who talked of the stereotypes that quickly emerged between easterners and westerners, nicknamed *Ossi* and *Wessi*. "Wessis were considered arrogant and thought they knew better," she said. "They were seen as colonizing – the capitalists coming to sell off the east. The westerners saw the easterners as slow, backward and naïve, expecting things to be handed to them."

Balina also saw the separation continue. "I have a lot of friends who lived in East Berlin, and a lot who lived in West Berlin. The first years, when I was visiting, going out to dinner was interesting," she said. "With my East German friends, we would go to the eastern part of Berlin, with my West German friend, we would go to the western part of Berlin. There was still an invisible line."

Other problems plagued unification, including the release of the names of people who had informed to the GDR's secret police, known as the *Stasi*. "It really changed the way people looked at each other in East Germany, because you never knew who were the informants," said Balina. "That was very difficult when people realized their teachers at school, their neighbors, their husbands were a secret informant." She compared the Gauck Commission, which was in charge of investigating the *Stasi* files, with the Red Scare in America in the 1950s. "It became a

witch hunt. Anyone who was even associated or mentioned in a *Stasi* file could lose everything, their job, their reputation, everything."

As the elation of the wall's collapse faded, resentment began to grow over the lead the westerners were taking in Reunification with top positions in business, education and government. "You had all sorts of western professors move in and take jobs instead of having all 'ideologically fit' eastern professors retain their positions," said Fritzsche, who added many business people in eastern areas were westerners who did not know the area. "City mayors were brought in from the west who had no attachments to the cities or the towns," added Balina. "Chair people of town halls were absolutely alien to the climate, the people and the relationships."

Many easterners fled to the west when the wall fell, in an urge to cast off an oppressive past. "It was looked down upon to be from the east, so people wanted to rid themselves of that imagined eastern tinge," said Balina, saying thousands of people moved to the western areas. "It was called the 'flight to the west,'" said Fritzsche. "It left a lot of aging communities in the east."

Opened to a world of new products, easterners also shunned old state-made products – everything from soda to tennis shoes. "Suddenly, eastern cars disappeared from the roads," said Balina. Eastern businesses suffered as people abandoned their products, and the unemployment rate in the east skyrocketed. "Even today, unemployment rates are higher in the east than the west, and that has left many people longing for the days of the wall," added Fritzsche, noting those old products are coming back into popularity as a form of nostalgia.

Rebirth

Throughout the years, barriers between east and west Berliners are slowly blurring and the city has been reborn, said the professors. "Berlin is a very interesting city. It's a beautiful city," said Balina. "There is a rediscovery of the city by the world."

Museums and cultural areas have taken over what was once a gray slab. "After the wall fell, the area boomed with construction and refurbishing projects," said Fritzsche. "Tourists and young people now flock to the area. I used to be able to ride my bike down the main streets, but it is much too busy these days."

Now the wall has been relegated to the history books. And the efforts to forget are now being replaced with efforts to remember. "I was talking in a class about how Germany is remembering the wall," said Fritzsche. "Students explore efforts going on now to document where the wall was. In many ways, it disappeared from Berlin, and now they are having to remark it."

Even though both Balina and Fritzsche experienced being near the wall and have witnessed how Germany has evolved over the 20 years since it fell, neither wants those experiences to dominate their classrooms. “You teach history, but you teach a part of your own history,” said Balina. “I acknowledge my experience as an eye witness, but I don’t value this experience above historical study. I think we are careful not to let a class be dominated by what we all lived through.”

Fritzsche agreed. “Ultimately, the personal becomes anecdotal,” she said. “We teach from the cultural point of view, from the history, rather than what we experienced.”

Just as east and west must walk a fine line to discover their new identity, so too must professors walk the line between experience and objectivity. “There has to be a balance,” said Balina.

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